Marxism and Education: Renewing the Dialogue, Pedagogy and Culture
Peter E. Jones (ed.)
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Review by Andrea Raiker

This book is not a call to man the barricades though I did begin to read with a certain prejudice at the back of my mind, aged about nineteen, clothed in black and complete with beret and embryonic moustache. But instead of putting Marxism and Education aside as being OK for undergraduates but not for mature academics with pensions to consider, I read...and read...and read. This book places Marx firmly in the centre of political debate about education now. I began to mull over how university courses bound to neoliberalist outcomes determined by the employability agenda appeared to be manufacturing the graduating young according to the needs of employers. I wondered how different this was, in essence, from the Victorian capitalism observed by Marx during his time in Manchester. Then, most children and young people were educated for their place in a production line. Today blue-collar workers are white-collar workers in the main, but the concept of ‘place’ remains. It is time, as Series Editor Antony Green argues, for us to consider the Coalition’s reforms through a Marxist lens so that we might recognise ‘...the emergent nature of social relational forms, their ontological depth, and the ever-present need to be wary of the foreshortening effects of undialectical abstraction and reifying practices’ (Foreword vii).

Renewing the Dialogue, Pedagogy and Culture is the third publication in Palgrave Macmillan’s Marxism and Education Series. All three volumes contain antihegemonic dialectical analyses centred on a range of interpretations of ‘education’ and ‘culture’. This volume has three sections: ‘Marxism and Culture: Educational Perspectives’, Marxism and the Culture of Educational Practice’
and ‘Marxism and Education: Advancing Theory’. Each section contains three chapters written by individuals who are passionate about both Marxism and education. Strangely this is not off-putting but stimulates curiosity. The chapter ‘A Little Night Reading: Marx, Assessment, and the Professional Doctorate in Education’ was irresistible. The ideas discussed, for example, what students understand by theory and doctoral study as labour, are articulated with great elegance and force. I have already given this chapter to a PhD student as an example of how philosophical perspective, educational theory and classroom practice can provide a seamless structure for the development of originality, the ultimate outcome of doctoral studies.

It has to be said that occasionally conceptions of ‘good’ academic writing have to be put aside so that the arguments can be enjoyed. For example ‘...the sacred cows of finance and the market were fair game in the media...’ would probably attract underlining and one or two exclamation marks if it had appeared in an undergraduate assignment. But writing in this way is in keeping with Marxist principles: definitions of what is ‘good’ are established by the elite and should be challenged. In general, however, the writing style is what you would expect in an academic volume. The term ‘culture’ is fully explored in relation to educators, students and the learning environment, but the overarching perspective on culture is Marx’s own, ‘...human activity as the fundamental life-affirming and life-creating condition of our species’. In other words, this book invites us to engage with the culture of learning, an intellectual culture of critical dialectic analysis aimed at social emancipation and economic transformation. At a time when the Secretary of State for Education is insisting on ‘traditional’ curricula in state schools on the one hand and supporting autonomy of study in the free schools and academies, perhaps those interested in education might welcome renewed debate on the contradictions in capitalism, and the need for struggle so that the voices of those whose raison d’être is learning and teaching can be heard.